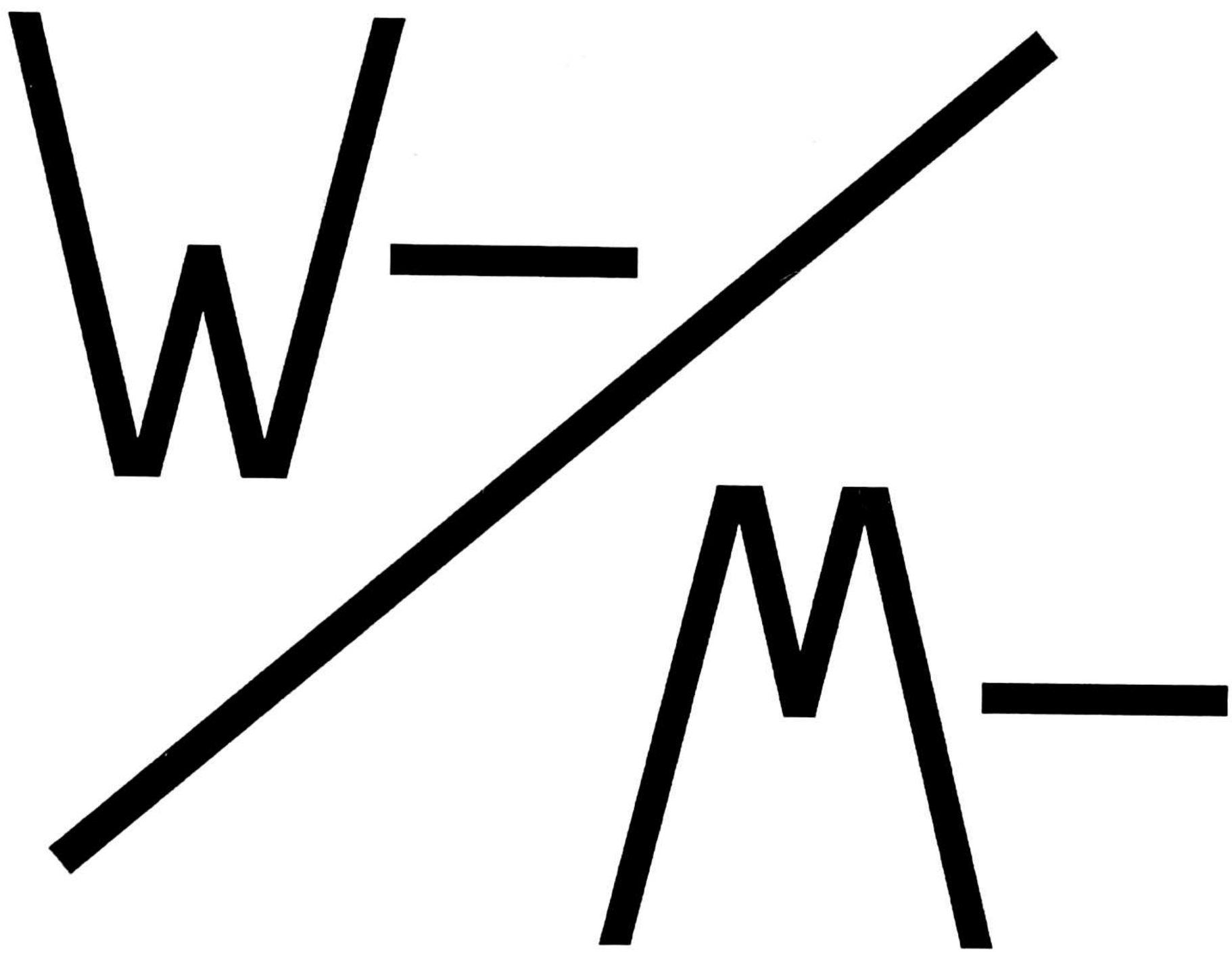
SplitLevel Texts

CARLA HARRYMAN



SplitLevel Texts
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
http://www.splitleveltexts.com

Copyright © 2013 by Carla Harryman
Cover design by Melissa Dettloff
Cover illustration by Melissa Dettloff

Thanks to MICHIGAN PUBLISHING for
assistance in our publishing efforts

ISBN: 978-0-9858111-2-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2012948662
Printed in the United States of America

W—/M—

LOOK AGAIN

9

PORTRAIT OF M

68

for Ron Allen

1947-2010

poet, playwright, and innovator of "zero airwaves"

LOOK AGAIN

1958 to 2012

Los Angeles - Detriot

0

A girl, confined to hanging clothes in the backyard for the good part of the morning, tires of the chore after pinning the third or fourth of her father's shirts by the shoulders to the clothesline. What's more fun than this is hanging up her dolls, pinning them at the shoulder to the clothes line: these dolls she identifies as big mama, little mama, white papa, and black papa, Clare, Chloe, Clovis. She runs out of dolls before she runs out of names, so uses large leaves as substitutes for dolls: these leaves are Kathy 1, Kathy 1½, and Kathy 3.7. She then resumes the "real" part of her job, pinning blouses, dresses, shorts, underwear, bras, and jeans to the line with feverish excitement: for she is concealing big mama, little mama, white papa, and black papa, Clare, Chloe, Clovis, Kathy 1, Kathy 1½, and Kathy 3.7 in the middle of the clothesline. These fanciful things dwell inside, where no one can see them from a distance. She alone, and exclusively, has created the substance and the knowledge of the inside. Standing back to admire her job, she says, I have made the inside of a cloud.

1

Anarchy is suspended in a cloud or an author's note for instigating a plot of a crime novel, or some other genre story, a fantasy fiction, in which an instance of anarchy is stretched to a feeling of infinity: how will this anarchy end? What trick is being played such that it can end? The world is going haywire and the author wishes to control it by imitating its anarchic effects.

People say they want a good story. They want the grit of daily life. Somewhere out there is a cozy kind of poverty with uplift stories waiting to be told. By way of such stories, anarchy vanishes, making a magic beeline into a waiting orifice.

1.5

Cartoon

If this body were as wild as thought, could it skip from one era to another, then whip the skipping and the eras together into a frothy potion with an indeterminate half-life, then vanish into a future world, then come back to report, and so on, until even the simile "as wild as" has dissolved in the eventful fusion of body, wildness, potion, thought, and sampled eras?

Would my craggy hand ride a bull in a 1950s rodeo while my webbed feet sink into an eternity of Pacific sands and my whip of a tongue cracks against the tip of a melting glacier? If you could see everything with your big eyes, you might catch sight of a tiny doll pissing through a super-magnified organ on fracking sites in Michigan and Pennsylvania, for the sheer joy in defiling hydraulic mining processes. After taking my fill of glacier water with my versatile tongue and wearing down the mining hydraulics with super-weapon urine, I would travel upward in a next body filled with cotton balls and oxygen. As I rose, I would blow on the plastic islands of the oceans with raging air channeled through my osculant lips. I would blow them to smithereens with such force that they would take orbit around the demoted planet Pluto. I would also be the one to discover the startling consequences of these, my own, ebullient

actions a century before anyone else could verify their occurrence.

Exhausted from my travels, I would recline in my recomposed, native flesh on the most unpublic of meadows, waiting quietly for the perfect mate. This is not yet the end of my chapter on a cartoon life.

While waiting for Mister or Misses Perfect, I would start to feel really good: peaceful, sexy, intellectually stimulated, messy with gratitude for the spectacular place I had come upon. And I would begin to wonder: what if people like me or the frackers, instead of making things happen, paused for a long time? Would doing next to nothing be an occasion for new friendships? Is it possible to stop functioning and keep it all going?

2

The acquisition of religious friends is a time-honored tradition in my family. Mom and Dad, who were atheists more or less, sent me to one church after another. They believed something unfathomably superior to their morality and beliefs would rub off on me, and therefore I would not be left alone in the world.

Love and I exhume this family strategy. Even as I no longer have many friends. It may be love has replaced all of them. Romantic comedies are the only religion left in my life.

3

Inside the open grave of the family dynamic, strange artifacts, starting with a tattered sheet of confessions, cover the little decaying boxes, which, when uncovered and pulled open, expose under spongy lids them-against-me, me-against-them, I'm gonna whoop you, I gotta get out of here, make more money than that, flexibility, helping them out, and penury.

One odd box, shaped like a VW Bug, crumbles when one tries to remove its rooftop, exposing a heap of police badges. Another box houses pesky phalanges who in rebel tongues speak their fleshless minds while dancing a graveyard jig. "Jesus was not the Son of God, he was a revolutionary. He was not a Christian, he was Jewish. He was not white, he was dark."

Above the tomb, his brown children march up white aisles singing soldier songs. Why are such sanctuaries the site of our romance?

4

Jamming facts with pronouns and nonentities or nonidentities. That's what a guest artist on yesterday's radio called it, when speaking of the music of improvisers across several decades. "Who wants to be who they say I am, or even they are? I was born in 1946 on a bolt of plaid in the family shop—*disgusted* I might add."

A set of instructions follows the artist's self-portrait: ease into the play, mix California and Detroit. Laugh a little. Turn the energy of revulsion into hot when the spring goes icy. Tweak fallout's trail to a shivering E flat. Friend your enemy, turn your back to it too. And show your face, be confrontational, peeling back to naked. This is an ephemeral world—why represent it as a Christmas tree for more than three seconds? Give more than a nod to poverty, be rich in spirit, keep the platitudes changing, blow into dirt. Then "nest at the end of a tunnel you have bored into a bank." Give birth to something sacred, scared, or foreign.

5

Will is going blind, can't read email. He calls, as we share an interest in the same music.

"Did you hear the program."

"No..." (I lie.)

"I can't make you get into it."

"No." (Another lie.)

"There's a meeting tomorrow, come if you can."

"Okay."

"Let me read you my notes."

"Okay."

"I'm finding the term *cosmic* deficient but I don't know what to put in its place. I'm trying to peel away at description and find some space for folks who need a break. I'd like to inspire some revolutionary fervor as well, but only a couple of them of late have responded favorably at meetings to my economic analysis of the cause of their poverty and addiction issues. But those are the people who give me hope. I hope they will keep coming to the meetings."

5.8

What does Will imply? What game of indirection and pointing? Am I the subject of Will's concern? Or a friendly witness to the machinations of his critical vision? Is he speaking "for the record"? Or off it? Will his voice carry beyond the circuit of this transmission?

6

This romance doesn't seem very gritty, does it? No feuds. No macabre family members disrupting make-out sessions in the back seat of a disabled vehicle. And only a hint of starvation, which is, in any case, voluntary.

And when you think of the hedge trimmers nearby rallying toward another yard of perfect lawn line, where once there were mobs with fists raised crashing in on the homes of auto magnates, or so I wish, the dirt of desire slips out of the grip of this account.

The dirt slips back in: vast, ferocious, surreptitious, unorthodox, unsafe, slippery wet love, sex, and traces of starvation. I can hear my mother's voice in the distance.

"You don't even know each other."

Then I a white girl bring my black lover home circa *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and my mother clams up.

Well, actually that love was only a lay. We played poker with folks I didn't know then went into the bedroom. The bed was made with a plush brown and red department store comforter and matching designer sheets. William pulled the sheets back and we both took off our clothes side by side, with the simplicity of siblings performing chores.

At some point, I noticed that a small ceramic lamp on the manly-looking nightstand cast its light in such a way that it haloed our clothes, heaped on the plush carpet, with a flat gold illumination. And I recall a new feeling, neither welcome nor unwelcome, but rather small, in the manner of a wave drifting randomly, breaking in a direction opposing the course of the surf.

7

When I heard the term *bedroom community* for the first time, I filled all the houses in my imagination with William's bedroom and the precise game of poker adjacent to it.

It was several decades ago on a train with Celeste en route to her family orchard back east that the term *bedroom community* was introduced to me.

Celeste claimed bedroom communities were deformations of the social order, which had an inherently sensible geographic distribution of cities, towns, and farms. Work was insensibly split from life in the bedroom community. Racist people who raped the city lived in the compound of the bedroom, where it was probably impossible to have sex.

A shadow of loathing crossed my psyche as she made her account: her representation of the bedroom community phenomenon and my private but indelible image of same did not in any sense coincide. I had already committed myself to the idea that sex motivated all human decisions and social configurations.

Or, another way of saying this is, nobody could possibly ever give up sex. I even had a theory of asceticism that included sex. Would she find my theory as stultifying as I found her conventional notion of sensible distribution?

7.6

(Or Sex)

It was this way: in the life of the mind of the curious child, atheists mingled with religious folk. Under the bed covers, flashlight in hand, she opens The Book to Deuteronomy. She enters a litany of begat. The litany terminates in grammar: I begat, you begat, she he no it begat, and divinely we begat, terrifyingly they begat. A sensation of exogamy reaches into the tiny survival room.

7.7

William and sometimes Willomina or Will or Willow and then there's Wallace and Willem and others and Lace or Lac which sometimes becomes lock when emotional revenge is involved. These, who are one, sometimes live in a little room with a door onto the roof of a very old church.

Sometimes they don't tell where they live or they prefer to meet in public or come out this way. And sometimes they stay.

8

It isn't very often that revenge, envy, or jealousy interferes with our free-spirited denial of the rest of the world, a denial which is also the basis for the asceticism W. adheres to and that I reserve for W. It is here, in this denial, that the longed-for grit makes its way into the narrative. A rusty car door closes on a raggedy shoelace attached to the funny tennis shoe of an adolescent passion. We agree the body is a temple. For W. it is sacred. I don't believe in transcendence but we both protect what we believe from contamination. The shoe dangling from its trapped ties on the outside of the passenger door is an object of wonder and compassion. When Willomina Lac touches my sacrum, I turn into myself.

9

From William Lake's rooftop, one can look down into a canyon of Manzanita, cactus, hummingbirds and big fat skunks. The skunks rise from the canyon at night and checker the front sidewalk with their overfed bodies. They circle trashcans, BMWs, and snaggle-toothed automobiles from the 70s rusting away on mechanic's boots next to jasmine shrubs. It is hard then to get to my dear Lake's door, a door he shares with the cavernous underused church.

I walk around the corner to Carter's Restaurant, call William from the pay phone while I wait for an order of twenty-four-hour pancakes made daily. When he eats them he always offers me bites, and I could live for this alone.

But if the skunks don't leave, I just go home and take the pancakes with me. I'm eating your dinner for breakfast, I tell him on the phone the next morning. Help yourself, he says, but he sounds a little disappointed. The flat taste of an old pancake reminds me to hang up. After I hang up, I'm confused. Why did I eat them?

10

The body is a temple says the preacher. It has also been said that a man's home is his castle. This castle is replicated in the malls. A woman such as myself delivers her body to the mall and on each visit a metaphorical drawbridge is raised. Inside the castle is the feast of kings. Everyday can be a preparation for a great feast.

A poet once claimed that the liberal state was the individual against any public wall explains my dear friend, the charming scholar Willem, while greeting me in the parking lot. Today and every day in our district, the individuals feast on the delights of private enterprise. I want him to go inside with me, so I suggest provocatively that there are no public walls around here.

When one takes a lover in the liberal state, is the wall a marriage license? When one takes a lover in the castle where the feast is under preparation between the canned soup and the meat counter, it is the inattention to time passing which becomes a violation of the temple. At the feast we walk hand and hand around and around looking at all the sights until we find ourselves staring at a scruffy little sea bass mounted on the wall singing "take me to the river and throw me in the water." This, says Willem, is what you brought me here for. But the river is only a commodity or the representation of a mote surrounding the walls of the heart.

Test

Once for a psychology experiment, I was paid fifteen dollars to rub my bottom lip while speaking spontaneously into a tape recorder for fifteen minutes. It was difficult to concentrate on rubbing my lips and speaking at the same time. Nonetheless, I had no difficulty keeping my thoughts to myself.

I was certain what the researcher secretly wished her human guinea pigs to do was talk while masturbating. Not once during the session was I compelled to verbalize this thought in the monologue she was purchasing from me. Nor did I divest myself of other thoughts having to do with sucking on someone's finger or someone's hand, erotic fantasies aroused by my own finger touching my lip.

One mildly paranoiac line of thought led me to wonder if her experiment was about compliance, about following instructions blindly. If one could perform this kind of task, as now, under benign duress, one might also be quite willing to give up state secrets to an enemy, to betray a friend to the House Un-American Activities Committee, to go to war when drafted, to parrot other's beliefs, and to appear to despise those for whom one has professed undying love and support.

While thinking silently—about masturbating, finger sucking, passive compliance, and betrayal of one's neighbors, kin, and lovers—I

talked incessantly about recipes: molasses rye bread, baked corn squash, and French onion soup. Food was a relatively unrevealing, benign topic, something I could ramble on about while boring my interlocutor to death.

Nowhere

Alone, I find myself thinking about Willem. Two phrases come to mind seemingly from nowhere, "the fractured mirror" and "identity is of little consequence." These are the kinds of portentous phrases one might choose to write in a notebook and return to later.

Willem had spent his early adult years in the 1960s refusing to go to war. He ran from, hid from the draft, prepared to resist it at any cost should it firmly call him despite the trips to Canada, the insanity he had claimed, the weight he had lost. Afterward, a psychologist interpreted his antiwar stance as the need to protect his identity.

"Had you gone, you feared you would have lost your soul."

To such psychology there was no actual war, no moral reason to resist it, no murder not to commit, no death waiting the young recruit, no toxic war policy, and no war crimes. According to the psychology, measly narcissism had saved him from war's perils, perils which would have been the source of his self-undoing should he have encountered them.

After the war had passed, what was Willem left with? The political refusal had, in his case, been successful. The soul is a thing given after the fact?

On my desk, I have discovered a fractured mirror on which I have pasted the remains of Willem's past deeds. It appeared here unexpectedly, the scoreboard of an old era, as something long overlooked and finally noticed.

"Identity does not matter." The presumptuous note is sent out in the evening post in a thin envelope with a blue stamp.

11

It is another day and Willow, who doesn't drive, is making her way out to see me in the suburbs, by bus. In order for her to get here, she will wait for some indefinite time in a bus shelter. The shelter's roof will be torn to shreds and the wind will howl around her ears. Everybody waiting will be hunched over in bitter cold. People will complain or not talk, except Willow, who has managed what she calls a permanent sabbatical.

Her monologue of relative freedom, peace, community, and sanctuary nearly bites my head off. I just sit around all day and don't really care about a living soul and make a record of anything I can that reminds me of her—is what she implies with every word.

"You can't let go of what happened..."

She feeds me lines the way Wanda fed the whip to Sacher-Masoch; although, I would never dare to beg Willow to come back.

"...the world could end tomorrow."

12

Wanda is correct, I spend a lot of time rehearsing what's happened, making some kind of mental or actual record, writing things down. Everywhere you turn, there's some scrap of paper with a note. Clearing my sofa of messages mixed with bills will take hours. I type for a little while, mostly job applications. Make it to the unemployment office in time not to be asked by the security guard to return first thing in the morning, sit in the back row of chairs, advance from chair to chair, row to row. The hall flows with folks yukking it up, mostly from an auto assembly local. "It's how we get family time, all part of the system," someone explains to me, the noob. But the twisted torsos, swollen slippered feet, misaligned legs, hunched shoulders, the difficulty in standing up tell a different tale.

12.9

The tale is part of a reality that can't be easily shared unless you are in it. When one is able to arrange to participate in a tour of assembly plants, what one sees is as light and smooth as two workers kissing in the front seat of an open convertible.

13

In anticipation of pleasure: a child trapped in a woman's body. The unlucky number awakens the girl to adulthood. She is not superstitious yet shies away from slang that marks this transition. "Bitchen." "Awesome." "Maintain."

Her seriousness is her pleasure. This seriousness sweetens the over cooked vegetables served with grandmother's Sunday tongue, it nourishes the hours passed with a friend who can't decide between Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, it imitates Angela Davis's polemics. In a next era's incarnation, this seriousness is differently embodied. Its disrobed avatar lounges in the background of a domestic drama wearing next to nothing with neither regard nor regret for the staged terror of the SLA, the Baader-Meinhof, the Weather Underground, the exile of Roman Polanski, and other dark sides of revolutionary or transgressive fame.

14

Says the narrator of James Baldwin's *Another Country:* to write something meaningful, one must get to the bottom of one's suffering or most terrible truths. My friend Jesus, when he was dying of cancer around the time of his 40th birthday, said the same thing to me one afternoon as he was discussing the writing of another poet. He was expressing, I thought, a terrible frustration that he, who had gone to the bottom, and was bobbing up and down, each day hitting it and resurfacing, would die, when the other writer would live. Empathically he experienced the fear of this other writer. He was about to say the writer's fear was a betrayal of the life force. In fact I think he did say or half say it, but the words tumbled inside a fit of coughing.

As Jesus's audience, or confessor, I was in collusion with a judgment involving the power of knowledge. This judgment, drawn from the lips of a dying man, bore the legitimacy, in other words, the reality, of death. If morality is possible only in the realm of ideas, then our belief in the value of the dying man's words means that in the face of dying, life becomes an abstraction and death becomes an authority. I am collaborating with this death now.

14.2

Sex separates its participants from everybody else. There was something sexual in the dying man's claim to such intimate, yet calculated thoughts, where friendship was embraced through the judgment of a third party. The friendship was real enough and the third person a necessary abstraction.

Jesus wanted to eat cold cuts so we ate cold cuts. He wanted the house dark and it was dark. He wanted me to wear bright colors and I did, including brick red and ice green. He wanted to go into the light and sit on a park bench, so we made that our pleasure.

15

V. precedes W.

As a sequel to my homage to the house that death leaves empty, I offer a brief history of kissing. I was never very interested in kissing until I fell in love with Vinny late in my teenage years. Vinny didn't like to kiss and would give me these warm little pecks that made me crazy for something more, but Vinny was a masochist and had no desire to express affection. Even though he wanted me to annihilate him from an aesthetic distance, he didn't believe in expression of any kind, only performance.

He was demanding about the performance of sex, which never involved penetration. This drove me to frenzies. One of my failed goals was to make myself come while caressing his nipples without him touching me or me touching myself.

It was not possible he would give me a wet romantic kiss, so I spent much of my waking life teasing, sulking, pretending to be aloof, reading Plato and Buddhist writings, pleasing and displeasing him by turns, baking bread and eating vegetarian meals while abjectly renouncing politics. In this world of non-belief, polemics were always discredited. I had foresaken my lips and tongue to love him.

He did kiss me the way I wanted once. It was after he was arrested for stealing a flashlight. He seemed excessively grateful that

I had worried about him when he was in jail. It came too late, the kiss had lost its appeal. When I rejected him, he declared his love.

16

When one knows next to nothing. And nude. As well as naked and laughed at. Too big for one's britches. And out of turn. Standing there with clothes that can be seen through, the clothes laughed at, one's size incoherent and outsized, the flesh too big to carry, the skin shaded on the pale side of gross, the lunch line of sweat and shoving, jokes about salami, one's feet getting smaller as one's stomach hollows with hunger pangs, and the breasts stick out so far they touch the person in front. The person in front inches forward fearfully as the invisible clothes pool around the ankles of the girl behind.

Everybody's looking. She can't move but she must act now in order to avoid mass chaos, the untamed pressure of the crowd. The teacher won't notice the braids unwinding in the loosened ribbons, if only she can make it through lunch. She steps out of the puddle of clothes, walking with simulated pride and everything exposed to the counter. "Spinach please, two helpings, no hotdog, and some milk."

17

In a dream she approaches the lunch counter, located at a gazebo in a great park with eucalyptus, sycamore, willows, and ash. This is a zone of east-west-north-south, a fifth dimension on the map where birds are exceptionally noisy, the woodpeckers are out in force to attack, and no space of air is left unmarked by something that flies.

She rushes in and out of the trees with fairy lightness, levitates (just an inch) behind their trunks, tears off a piece of Eucalyptus bark, slides it into the pockets of her baggy capris, sniffs it on her hands. Her nose bunches up, her eyes swim from sticky scent. She slips unseen to the food line, panting a little, the light burn of eucalyptus fumes sliding down her throat. She jumps up and down, chilled, excited by the rapid changes in the air temperature and the fact that she is the first in line. A ball of gnats hovers around her ankles and knees. A monarch butterfly kitschily lands in her hair.

She easily pushes herself up from her toes to levitate again, just above the annoying gnats. Wearing the crown of the butterfly and an anklet of caterpillars, she walks on air to the massive steam table which stretches out to a near infinity. Hubcaps cover metal bowls of food set into the steam table. A server in pocket-laden

coveralls appears at the top of the shaded gazebo's distant steps. He approaches ceremonially, stands at quiet attention for several seconds, then bows his head silently praying over the hubcaps in his area of the steam table. The air stills.

Down the aisle she observes other servers are doing exactly the same thing. She bows her head too. The earth is dry as ice.

She prays for food, for bounty, for sweet tiny peas. Prayers over, the server in front of her pulls from his coveralls a tiny flat-tipped screwdriver which he applies to the hubcaps, inching around them, prying them away from the steel bowls set into the steam table. The world is round and opening. She rubs her hand against the eucalyptus leaf secreted in her pocket. Her throat burns.

The server tucks the screwdriver into a tiny pocket at the top of his coveralls, digs into another deep pocket and pulls out a plier. With the plier he lifts off a hubcap, stacks it in a vertical holder on an otherwise empty area of the steam table. He repeats this, lifting and stacking the hubcaps in his work area until he's filled up the holder with the strange steam table lids. The task takes about thirty minutes to complete. He returns the plier from whence it had come, deep in the coveralls. Then from an even deeper pocket he slowly pulls out a hefty hand shovel. At last he looks at the girl who hasn't minded in the least how long it took him to do his job, since this is a dream. In an understated fashion, he smiles and asks her, "What

would you like for lunch?"

The smell of grits, greens, something salty, and fried onions give her ecstatic pause. She levitates a little higher than her abilities normally allow to see all the way into the steel bowls. The server looks away, briefly, as if not to compromise with his own thoughts her individual decision. Caterpillars crawl up her legs. "I'd like the garden but not the ranch, the dairy farm but not the henhouse, please."

"You don't like eggs?"

"There's only so much one can wish for in a day, and I believe I already have several in my hair."

The shovel digs into a bowl, leverages a small garden with various greens, nightshade vegetables, and several fruit trees, including a storybook cherry and a peach weighted with low-lying fruit. He eases the garden off the hand shovel and onto the concave surface of a hubcap. "When you're done with this, come back for the dairy farm. If it's still here, we'll get the pulley out to serve you."

"If it's still here? There are so many bowls, I can't foresee an end to them."

"What would we mechanics and line workers do without the young's voracious optimism?"

At this moment the dream cuts to a still tableau. The girl sees herself at the center of a scene in an unframed oil painting tacked

to a wall above an empty produce bin in a vacated supermarket. She is depicted seated under a tree, holding a cherry stem to her mouth.

"Am I inside or outside the picture?" she asks the mechanic, trying to get back into this scene. "Will I be caught stealing?"

Austerity Measures

These had been threatened and then imposed. Times changed and the measures were deemed no longer necessary. But the family imitated the state mandates long after life had returned back to normal. The family sustained their commitment to austerity measures, carrying their know-how into the future where no one seemed to have the slightest regard for such wholesome practices. This family could sacrifice at will and yet maintain its self-sufficient way of life.

Beyond the family enclave, people were no longer people. They were mobs living without thrift and having lost their personhood, they were unable to plan for the future. Their piggy banks were empty.

18

On this calendar day, what I want to know is not the truth about myself but about another person. I want to know why Wally flies an American Flag on the rooftop adjacent to his church attic room.

We had agreed there was a separation between church and state. I'm trying to be truthful, he says, passing me a heaping platter of his oven barbequed chicken. Our agreement is bogus: there is no such separation. In giving myself to the church, I have capitulated to the rest of the fascists. You don't know, he adds, what it means to be a black man in society.

I want to know because I'm from the class of people who consume knowledge. I eat it at every meal. The king, my father, has placed St. John in the temple and taken the key. That was my key to knowledge and I am mad. All of the women inside the castle are preparing roasts and whitefish and side dishes. The king is delighted with the way things are going, but I want the head of Jochinan. You better stand with me says the king. All of your friends feel contempt for you. They won't any longer give you the time of day. The Saint is a tasteless, flag-waving thief, who has teased me into a frenzy for which I am not responsible, a frenzy they just can't bear to witness.

Now that you have had your fill, asks Wally, why don't you tell me a story about what it was like to have been the daughter of a king?

After Frederick Law Olmsted

The ball game, hard drugs, church, a particular weather forecaster loveable geek, cereal boxes, weapon humor, police and prison jokes, cock and tit and Viagra jokes, accents and dialects and plainspoken Americans and elitist intellectual discourse, Gary Gilmore memorials, and more Jackie O., the only non-American Olympic athlete featured on American prime time television, representations of drooling teenage boys, of girls with ten-word vocabularies, of young men designated potential criminals, of tribal piercings and progressive causes, of Green Party constituents, of children going to church to school to city park programs, the national narrative of overcoming obstacles, awards for excellence in protected domains, soft screwball caring adults, the fallible but loveable American romantic, money-grubbing bureaucrats and corporations running for personality contest politicians, the Worst Chefs in America, religious values, goodness, the shrink-wrapped middle class, labor unions as institutions of the classless society, stressed-out kids, ignorant and negligent parents, bad schools, bucolic ads of old folks running in the wind, the 47th execution on New Years Eve in Texas on the brink of the real millennium, white folks still here, the early twentieth century demand for a nondecorative

art of American reality, its regard for simplicity and open natural spaces, healthy children, women symbolizing nature and a new freedom, looking like flowers, represented alone for the first time in open park areas post *fin de siècle.*

19

It had been the end of the twentieth century and then the beginning of the twenty-first century. One day, Castle Mart was abandoned. Years later the "for lease" sign is still in the window. When asked, the fishmonger would not say where she was going, or the cashier who rang us up late at night. Through the window one now sees cavernous space and scratched-up flooring: under which I imagine a secret paradise of hedgehogs thriving in burgeoning wilds. This post-urban fantasy is a daydream too hopeful to neglect. But one doesn't wish to be caught out peering in too long.

What else is gone? The wedding cake shop frequented by the nobility and their mothers, aunts, and cousins. And the sporting clothes store where royalty had purchased their ski wear. And what remains? The store for shipping purchases to relations in distant lands, the pharmacy, a pizza haunt, a flower shop still servicing weddings, funerals, graduations, and holidays. And a favorite deli.

20

I am no more married than you are. This declaration comes from a neighbor on the other side of the fence. I am clipping the dead white heads off the mums while thinking about pruning some other things, like the phone wires or Mr. Willis Lock's promises to take me to a garden party downtown yesterday. Pick me up, he said, at 5:00 near the colonnade entrance to the library. Cut. I was there in my white spaghetti strap and blue suede tie, or silly little leash, puppyish and undone and willing to feel good.

Sometimes snotty-nosed children, sometimes just plain snotty, spoiled children come running in and out of my house when the door is open to them. Cut. Sometimes friends vomit in the yard. Cut. Sometimes my friends have addiction or partner problems. Sometimes we can't discuss political events, like the Gulf War, even years after and into the Storm War, without becoming at least secretly hostile. Cut. These sites of tension and tenderness are as stabilizing as the Ritalin the kids take for the controlling of classroom behavior.

Love interests can be obsessive. Cut. All of this chaos and confusion disguised as predictable human behavior hardly signifies. Cut. Things to refuse to think about are growing in number. Cut. The grip on everyday life slips into a permanent emotional state of

irresolution called love with no object. Cut. These kinds of emotions are not appealing, are abstract and without a trace of grit. Cut.

21

Window persists in refusing to meet my other friends. She dislikes what she imagines as their jealous, earnest judgments.

Window recently refused to live with me, even though W. claims it is not something he would particularly notice. Window says my fantasy about her living here has nothing to do with what's real.

She has never eaten at my house and, before its closing, refused to go shopping with me at Castle Mart. She wouldn't let me hold her baby or take the child on daytrips when she was older. "What's real is something you don't yet get."

I do get it that Window is an honest person. She says she doesn't love me but that my unanchored psyche fascinates her.

You're entertaining, she says. You watch things happen like you're not noticing. Like right now my hand's on the back of your neck. You're almost in a sweat but you're just going to sit that way with that plain little smile on your face carrying on about something else.

Something Else

Will they keep the window open when they do the bugs?

22

The infestation began during the era of shared sacrifice, when it seemed that almost everything had assumed the form of neglect, even as the neighbor still vigilantly walked his dog and a certain W. from a distant state attended to his health, jogging every morning and enjoying classic hard-ons every night from the station of his kinked-up sofa bed. And, even as I continued to make an anarchic record of some of those things that would otherwise go unrecorded, there was a common understanding that in the grand scheme everything had been more or less neglected.

Or, we could tend to but not be tended to.

Our anger would not be noticed.

Nor the care with which we addressed one another.

So the neglect was not exactly coming from us. A decision would be made, and, after, there was no turning back, no rethinking a problem, as this would cause an unbearable pause in the forward motion of the daily narrative.

Or was it coming from us?

We, or W., wanted to step out of the picture, the forward motion of the daily narrative. We wanted to deliberate slowly, preferably while on the sofa bed. A bed free of bugs.

The infestation continued, passing through our desire, never resting on the bed. We called it GREED, an acronym for Galvanizing Retributive Event Ending Deeds.

We called it STUN, for Still Turning Up Nothing. We called it other things than what it was because it had exhausted its meaning and yet the infestation gave us the eerie sense that every sound we made had been picked up by a gluttonous swarm which lived off of our noise. The swarm would shrivel into insignificance only if we quieted down, fashioned ourselves into an altogether different style of creature. The swarms grew as we ceased to change.

We wanted to step out of the picture.

23

What happens is this.

I ask Will, since his hand on the back of my head feels good and he has to leave, to loan me one of his clove-colored leather gloves with the sportif holes uniformly punched into the leather. I pull a string through the holes at the tip of the index and fourth fingers and tie the string around my neck. The g-love rests lightly on my back. All day, as I walk around, the g-love caresses my skin while the string tugs delicately at my Adam's apple. The psychological effects of the experiment are pretty interesting. There are moments, for instance, when I have an overwhelming feeling that Will belongs to me. At other times, I believe I am being strangled by my love interests.

Obsessively, I review them, lighting mothishly on one interest after another in the fake-lit garden of fantasy. The jealous physical world returns me to my senses. The soft g-love at the back of my head, reassuring and affectionate, bobs up and down as I feed myself polenta with tomato sauce.

Future Scene

On the drive out of the town where my job has been relocated, the door to the tax service shop is open. A white woman in a crisp suit sits behind a desk, holding a pencil and facing out at the cars stopped at the signal in front of the storefront. As she looks back down at her tiny computer screen, an African-American man wearing a faded ice green robe over his street clothes appears on the doorstep with a broom. Bending over the broom, he sweeps away dry snow which sprays into the air catching the winter light.

Just yesterday, about an hour before the blizzard, I had seen him standing on the street corner outfitted in the green robe and a Statue of Liberty crown. He was holding in front of his chest a sign with red letters that announced "Liberty Taxes Done Here," and pointing with the free hand toward the shut door, the one now open.

Present Scene

The imprint. Holy Grail. Some magnified regret. Recuperation of the lost item. Singing to bring it back.

Singing to please a skeptic. Proffering one's own regret as hers or his. Collecting relational debris. Finding room for it in one's quarters. Having quarters.

Being in the black.

Stuck in a doorway: if you do or don't, damned either way. Tendril brushing skin.

Money changing hands.

Then no hands, but money.

Then no money.

But a tune, Miles Davis cool brought forth from a satellite dish. Throwback to Sputnik in an airspace of drones.

Spacing themselves in quick bursts. In the red economy. In the red desire.

Coughing lovers stumble out from the overhang of the Fox Theater. Take their time in a southwesterly direction. Weather, impatient with their slow pace, pushes them forward. They cover their heads with their coats, wipe their faces with the back of their hands, pause at the entry of a club. Kiss in a thunderclap.

Inside, ringtones pick up rain, give back a waking world, codify noise. Riddle up space.

Lots of space. A resurgence of weeds. Pillows of thought in the dying city. That won't give up.

It being not, what? The city is not a man.

Sleeping standing up in freezing rain.

And the bakery's early hours.

24

A girl holds a bag with one small and cramping hand. With the other hand she picks up bruised plums and drops them into the cavernous bag. She fills two or three paper bags with the bruised plums, then she starts on the peaches. She fills a bag with bruised peaches, and then she begins on the pears. She fills the sack halfway with pears. She sits herself down on the dirt next to the lemon tree. Her white shorts and brown feet are now coated in red dust. The smell of citrus overwhelms the other offensive fruit smells. The putrefaction released from the other fruits deepens a little the sprightly scent of citrus lightly burning the mucous membranes in the nostrils and throat. Her ponytail sticks to the sweat on the back of her neck.

She recalls the term "sweat glands," wondering if they have anything to do with mumps or lumps as she tugs on one lemon and then another until one of them drops. With her unkempt fingernails she tears the rind off the top of the plucked lemon and sucks on it. Her tongue and throat burn, her nose twitches. Her abdomen puckers and her thighs squeeze together with sour and sweet.

24.3

Now close your eyes and tell me why you want to make these horseflies cry. The girl, who is possibly me, has shamed her mother. Her head is bent into the half-full sac of pears, whom she addresses as poets.

Her limbs and heart are heavy. She just can't pick up another piece of fruit.

25

It is going to rain. With the clothes still a little damp, the girl must hurry to unpin them. A rumble of thunder doesn't startle her: she is unaccustomed to thunder, rare in these parts, so thinks it's big ocean waves. Then wonders if she's ever heard surf like that from her yard. She folds, as she was told to, each article of clothing before she places it in a white plastic basket. When she's done, she looks at her work, wondering if the clumsily stacked clothes would have been tidier had it not been windy when she folded them.

The dolls now hang and wave unevenly in the wind. Big mama is pale and puffy as a stuffed potato. The wind picks up. The dolls sway irregularly. Somewhere there is also the irregular movement of chimes. Dolls with chimes are unities in a weather system. The girl looks up at big mama and little mama, white papa and black papa, Clare, Chloe and Clovis. These are my charms. Their magic is that they are living and not living and that they belong to me and that they move for me (but I can't decide how they move) and that I breathe for them.

25.1

The dried leaves hanging on the clothesline, once known as Kathy 1, Kathy 1½, and Kathy 3.7 have lost their human status. "I can't take you inside, you are all falling apart. Don't be sad now. It's okay."

26

There was a pond the girl visited. Cattails brushed the side of her ears there. Birds as familiar as dolls held firm to sharp grasses. Back home was an image laden with instruments for use. Here dragonfly and water beetle were the reincarnations of ancients buried in old wars. Was the pond a swamp? Dolls, she said to the birds, this is not history. This is a story before history. Each of you go to the edge of the war and invert it. Then come back here, assuming you don't mind this difficult request. You are the only ones who will know I am a queen.

27

Wanda has rung up but otherwise it's as quiet as a garaged lawnmower. Outside are dropping leaves, a red flag, a man on a ladder spray painting the white siding of a house. Wanda is saying last night her stove shorted out, water was caught in the burner wiring, and now her house stinks of burning plastic. My stove is off now she says, just audibly.

And I who want power chose a girl who resembles a boy...
And do you suppose I was agreed with, and had anyone any other one's ideas?

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

PORTRAIT OF M

Divine and common sense M. Contradictory M. Subject, object, and instrument—M, who favors anarchic gestures: of the body, of speech, of words and everyday happenings. Yet to some, she appears as a mere typist, or reflection of others' opinions—their doxa of drawings and music, of social cues and searing remarks. Somewhere else she is a public figure tarnished by the swing of private gates.

Imagine her as a sequence of appearances on a sizable screen. Imagine her as a concatenation of dance steps, or provocations within a frame.

Although she is said to be "as wild as nature," you may come to think otherwise. You may observe she bewitches hardly anyone—except a few people who want to love her, I can tell you about this personally. I can ventriloquize that.

M's axe is clean.

Her idiom is as thin as air at the tip of a melodrama. As dark as an oxidized coin. As recurrent as a cicada-lined tree. See, in the picture of a mine and a factory, M's a player and figure. In a drawing of hookers and clients, she is the undisclosed subject. And she is none of these things. She is none of them but a grain in a recording of ghost tides woven in leaves and clouds.

On a next screen, flags wave for M. "Here is the way to M." No way at all. No access to verb that isn't subject. No contrast that isn't complement. Double and singular, triple and flat, her civility is the glare off a mirror one holds up to her and her double holding the mirror. Thin as a flint she rumbles in wagons across hurt farmland. She's a thundercloud water has slipped from into an elsewhere.

In a picturesque scenario she finds cause to punish a soothsayer. "The visionary was descending Lombard Street, stopped at the fourth curve. Why couldn't the car continue down the hill? He was just stalled there with his window opened on my future." He envisions M there trapped, so she tosses him into a drawer of antiquity just up the hill near the red house hedged with squat shrubs. "I'll see my future without your assistance."

Above the scene a prop plane hums a little tune as it gives off puffs of air mixed with news. *Who wants it? Needs it? Has it really gone?* Signals from the prop's skywriting relay these questions during a brief commercial break.

All ways are M's ways flares on a flat screen. How did she find her way here? Is she real? Does she shiver?

Oasis and drought tumble into a sudden kiss.

M is laughing as she types placeholders under a heaven of cross-dressed equipment rusting in a pristine landscape, documented in a program dedicated to the recuperation of historical affects. M likes to instruct for no reason and for the sake of the lurching rhetoric she puts forth as an indicator of her future's behavior.

M has stopped at a next wilderness and it is not lovely. She has no opinion about this. She's made a break with criteria, which she yet examines: in her examination, the criteria are black-boarded, then skewered, then molded into handsome animal forms each branded on the thick part of their body with a word: "accuracy," "measurement," "practical plan," "proper subordination," "system."

Systems mixed with shadows have compelled her to seek her place in a natural order. This "place" is what she discovers in a hut, "so clean you can eat off its floor."

These are my sprays, creams, and lathers, my genders, my flagellations, she declaims to her mirror, the one with razor sharp pages cut from *Popular Mechanics* magazine. The sky can be its own business pages, she observes. Though the deposits whisked off these pages smudge her and she admits to otherwise having been tarnished by filings in past litigations.

The nice are the worst and the best are easiest to discard. *Who wants? Needs? What has flown?* Discredit a real time show as a fiction and you'll find yourself in a zoom lens, says M. One such discredited show romanticizes her, has placed her in a landscape faded under a garden arch. Though saving grace is just a program M hides herself in when she prepares for battle.

At the horizon a wasting enemy waits. M breezes in with her army to meet it. She loves to care for her army.

The hold of the brittle enemy's ship is gorged with a market of strung fruit, fresh meat, and cigarette commercials. Behind this façade are the backwaters and the black water testers who make a performance of swallowing smoke rising from the overpriced and hoarded fruit. See, they are on fire for a fight.

Their flames flare up in a book where the withering enemy lurks in its pages. Next a dead authority will spring to life, commenting that M uses her army as an ointment to soothe love's bruises.

You might also observe that those fragile opponents of M's store photographs of loving, old family members inside the book to discourage their ghosts from spreading panic in them: these are fearful battlers. "There are too many of us." Daring not to speak it, they carry this knowledge inside, defending themselves silently from the loud M and those social media analysts who, like her, seek to expose their minute gestures and discrete routines to public scrutiny.

M harbors the odd thought that crimes of passion do not truly exist, that this category of murder is no longer an operative term in the sweet anarchy of fantasy. There are always extenuating factors. All violent death is caught up in ruinous nature plus polemics. People are trapped by property, which multiplies out of their control. "It flows into nature fast."

"To possess nothing is the better way." People envy M for the blasé way she tosses her clothes onto the road. The clothing enlivens the road with the error of her ways, her absent-minded research, and the opacity in her claims to freedom.

"Freedom can be a bore sometimes." She knows I will repeat the phrase and in repeating it for her I will have pointed in her direction, locating her with her army at the bank that serves the machine with no engine. The army withdraws money in order to remind the enemy of all that's left, as a kind of threat. On M's side of the mirror money is otherwise as useless as a scar.

She wants me to know where she is without her having to say anything to me. I know to rest at the stop.

What has flown? Is it a pity? Who can say?

She professes she's become enamored of climbing certain walls and fences, especially those guarded by border patrols. The unmentionables in her army pay attention to her cues. I listen up. Our presence facilitates her ascent, her flying swiftly onward and upward from one movie's scene to another's. Without a script.

M the calamity of her sex agrees to nothing. There she is at a rest stop with the guards of the premises offering her a window in its pane stolen from a demolished house. Eventually they offer her everything she would need to construct her own house. "I'll take that hut and refuse your house." She deposits decaying limbs from a homestead clearing in Montana on a nitrogen-depleted plateau north of San Diego.

The extra window, still in its frame, rests on the side of M's doorway, as she's become distracted by slavery. Enslavement is symbolically represented by two figures descending a ladder in one pair of shoes. She puzzles over this image of shoes. Sometimes an inaccurate depiction can elicit a feeling of shame better than bald truth.

Slantwise, M dresses to make me laugh.

"You remind me of someone's writing I used to like before my release from prison"—referring to a so-called well-publicized event that I am barely aware of: I don't read the *Miner's Gazette* or other records of her past. M assumes she is the subject of my thoughts and then she goes about her business blind as a skunk on a pink lawn.

"The newspaper is now canceled and I'm going to sing the news." All by yourself? I ask nervously.

I want her to get that I've heard her. That I wish to seize this moment to rabble-rouse and swing with M, who is her own song drafted on a wild tongue.

She begins the news program in Leipzig at the hearth of a favorite sound engineer. The engineer quietly records the colors of debt M voices. A six-pointed star formed by two overlapping triangles, palm tree graphics in a pattern on an orange wall, and the center divider of a freeway cut into the quaint scene with a certain insistence.

Note there is a dispute about whether or not the voice's colors ought to be pleasing. Who will get the message? If the song is translated into a universal language it will be more pleasing than if it registers the shades of angst in a first language.

M suggests I withhold my opinion about their debate until it simmers. I take a deep breath, look out the window at a yard of potted cacti. Craning further, twisting twisting like a noodle, I can see a hot air balloon descending near the garden wall. It bears a sign, *Remember the Harp,* in German.

In another frame M clarifies that she does not want her army to think the wilderness belongs to her. She wraps criminals in sex and draws herself in their sweet lisps. There ought to be more such drawings she says, because imitation is a prism she tends like a doctor caring for a patient and a lover tending to the same patient and a parent nursing a sick child. These are visualizations floating in a nursery where the child is sleeping on her side, her face to a wall, her back to us.

Drawings supplement being while they frame the subject as a caged thing. In this sense there is nothing more philosophical than a drawing, and there is nothing more political than when the drawing is brought to life. Creation as an action must occur unobtrusively for it to have beneficial consequences. "Because all markets want it all." On that note M's army, grown agitated, draws up plans in the chamber of nonevents.

Some plans chart interiors from an exterior perspective, elaborating two forms on one surface. M's counter and surfaces are immaculately clean, except there are the absurdities of the chalk, which have appeared on them seemingly by magic. But the chalk, along with the objects she attempts to write on, crumbles under pressure. I may be left when everything else is gone, says M. "Far away is under my feet." Until she pulls this distance to her and wears it tucked under her belt. Sometimes people crawl out from under this trap into her pools of sweat and bathe in her secretions. She freshens up by climbing onto a page of my writing and wringing herself out on it or shaking herself onto it in dog fashion.

As a dog's body with prickly hair and a growl as effective as a bite, she confesses that her broad rhetorical representations of human action are devised as a trap in which people are inveigled to tackle each other without suffering any consequences beyond the immediate pain dished up within the control event. Accidents in these situations aren't always ugly or violent, but sometimes in between a real event and a wish for a similar event a subtle dialectics deploys weapons that blank out the mind-set of a congregation. Such ghostly instances are not death, she says on one day, and on another day she says live and let live.

I can tell you M exposes her fear to hide it better. It cannot be colonized when turned face out. Thusly emboldened with a contemporary sparkle, she ventures to where tributaries of financiers gather to consult, to satisfy themselves that the price they can offer M and her compatriots is set. Their offers are refused while fees they had been blind to are exacted as they depart. On the margin of one folio I found abandoned in the dirt is a drawing of a Wall Street trader being taken prisoner in a rubber tree forest.

We shall not be re-colonized, states stately M.

Next M wants to give up control. Or is that only gossip? She won't respond to this question. She waits for an early geological event in a room she's entered through a side door. Her companion in the little room is a baby. Have we not met before? she asks it.

She confides to it she understands the prisoner's demands. "He is a verbose man but I like him. Then I executed each demand perfectly but he didn't notice that he had been released because he was already paying attention to something else."

Can I say that I am obligated under the circumstances? she asks me. Her Doctor of Geology she calls me, for she couldn't identify the name of the rocks or distinguish the copper streaking in the ground of her own life, if her life depended on it. I am as close as she can get to a domestic partner: I can observe her patience expand and sediment along with her expectations.

The baby reminds us of her presence in the little dribbles of ink falling onto her cheeks and splashing onto the floor for the hounds to lick, or link to the marvelous feeling in the tongue when the words fold in the mouth—akin to the first time the baby had felt them. Sometimes M truly belongs in that room: she is often reticent to leave it. The mirror clears up her misgivings, remarks on the pains she takes in love.

Oh, that old thing she says with a swarthy smirk through which she parts her lips. I tell her I will wait for her as long as she likes. She suggests my reflection is all that I am.

This takes us to a period in which M manufactures the nineteenth century in the nursery of the house she has rented, where she goes by the name Mary. "Anyhow, I'm a name plus a purse, really. I can travel far but shall prefer to stay here. People want to call on me, yet I don't know them."

This is M fey. "I hate the purse and the gate snapping in the yard. I'll lose my voice in these bubbles of talk."

She returns to her hut then travels back and forth. A battleground competes with a piano soloist on an unfinished terrain. A train set zips around under her dress. In the distance a mule steps on her hound. Pandora and Minerva decide its time for a visit.

Others are not aware of our secret friendship with the goddesses, but they trust that Mary will know how to talk up our hidden union, relinquishing to air and daylight several trapped beasts when she opens her mouth. But contrary Mary is not going to agree to anything. Mary now so young will go, find, do. Her quick actions will indirectly influence the results of certain experiments she assures them as she throws off her dress and stands before them naked as the cluttered century will allow. "I will move all the clutter up to the very end of the next epoch and sell it off cheap then burn the money. We'll get a fresh start."

In the meantime Pandora and Minerva are preparing to draw lots. Mary does not understand "we have been acting as a unit of value" is an expression they use to justify their regressive games.

Mary treats Minerva and Pandora like trinkets, polishing their lots with rags from the philanthropists. She fills up her downtime making a portrait of Ovid. He was, after all, in exile too. "When you open the blinds and look down on the street you see it interrupted by a great tree."

The tree grows into the house's interior.

Who wants? What's flown?

M flits out of her cocoon as a monarch and flits back to the future epoch where she came from originally and where she belongs is her newspaper's version of her travels. In an interview she describes her own epoch as a big brain whose intricacies provide good camouflage. "And this, forgive my nervous laughter, is a relief and a welcome end to the butterfly myth."

"I die in two weeks."

And I will never die, says M, answering herself as if she were reassuring her children of their mother's immortality. Perhaps it is time for a new issue.

I scowl at this suggestion as we walk. Shall I sing of the tailing or the minerals that still lie deep underground? Aren't these the options? This mode of cynicism is new to me. I have to swallow hard before I report it. And then, even more surprisingly, she asks me to forgive her. "I just returned from someplace truly disgusting. Forgive me."

Her mirror is an historical object but you can't see history in it. Through it, I can forgive what M has of herself, which is too much.

There she is in her hut with an overabundance of herself. Operatic music fills the space, then as the music ends, rushing noises fume forth just as the monument collapses, giving off a mining tragedy. Pandora and Minerva have left their mark on us. I am not in the habit of issuing such statements from M's hut. "I am becoming a capitalist nightmare in spite of myself. That's what they say. I need to fuck somebody over fast."

She says I can fry an egg on her tongue as a diversion from seeking out and solving problems. "You are to look in the correct places where there are no problems." The divine M gnaws on the cigar heating up her fowl mouth. "Stick with me kid or the egg on my tongue will get to your face, that slim little volume. When I look at the fragility of your legacy, I look pretty good in it, don't I?" What are you going to do M when I stop being obsessed with you? That will never happen is her reply. We have almost fallen into the mirror. Wouldn't it be interesting to try it once? Pandora shut your mouth! Which one of us is speaking?

M the divine, obdurate, shameless, and opaque being. The theatre has opened its door for her and claimed her as its own without understanding its error, which is that her shamelessness can't be graphed, nor properly edited. Melodrama seeds her obduracy; therefore, she can't play someone else, only herself. All of her charisma comes from her ambivalence toward what she's learned from, *uh-hem,* philosophy, and has nothing to do with acting like something she's not. She argues that because her propositions are readily revisable, they can be circulated without regard for authentication. "It's really about convenience and I don't think that's what acting's about, but I am willing to play a role once to see what it's like to be on stage."

When she is told she is to play the part of Minerva, she acts surprised. "I never dreamed I would be asked to be wise or even technically proficient."

"Those will be your lines. Remember them." The director talks like he's figured her out on the spot.

You will regret this or not, says M. Interpersonal animosity has little place in M's world, but hatred of the symbols others identify with can bring out an army at M's command.

All ways are M's ways again flares on screen.

The director has given her several scripts including one in which she is to play the role of Trojan Horse.

M tears off her housedress and asks the director to tease her breasts to get her excited for the part. The army is inside of her waiting for her instructions at which point they will invade the theatre and terrorize the assembly of cultural workers. By then I will be gone, says M. Although none of this is true, you know: it is what you like to hear as the script pages are turned to the movie, the one in which you plan to use the president's affair with my breasts as a money-maker. (And you know it can get more obscene than this.) If you promise to keep the money all for yourself and not let it circulate, I'll do whatever you want.

M can be patient when willing a nonevent. The virtue of modesty is also available to M, and privacy too. These work wonders on the outside world. Which is rather inverted you know.

I woke up out of a dream and knew that M wanted to harm me. "I woke up out of a dream and knew that Pussy wanted to harm me." M is reading the line from the Kathy Acker novel while I am thinking the same thing in the same way as the other writer wrote it. There is a problem with themes that creep into her hovel to get her on stage, and M erases problems faster than the producers of dramas can create them—even out of her.

This hovel is pretty good, it will do, there have been people much less fortunate than I cries M in an odd exaltation as she slaps her penknife to the ground of this grandiloquent domestic façade and asks me to bend to the ground on all fours with a straight back, slowly curve my neck down so that my hair brushes the floor before my lips can touch it and form slowly a gentle arch by rounding my back gradually such that the precious undersides of my body and breasts fold romantically inward. "Place the knife between your teeth using only the mouth, lips, and teeth to pick it up off the ground—and snarl a little."

She requests that I repeat the same movements several time so that when the director visits to face his terrible conflicts, with his greed on one side and his artistic impulses on the other, M can make a suggestion about replacing Minerva with a gothic archway shading the ghost of a romantic heroine—the role she is to perform, if she is to perform at all.

Beyond the departing bribe, one fumbles with seduction. I will live here just as long as it takes him to give me what I want, says M. I didn't plan to go anywhere with you, she tells me. It puzzles me things have turned out so unexpectedly. Holding the knife between my teeth is painful. She is mesmerized, however, by my performance and won't stop it. She laments that it is too dark to show me how I look but she is only acting. Acting the way the

director would like her to act, though she only does this for herself. I prefer to fight, to devise military strategies and study weapons, and even to be humiliated than to comply and obey, she says as she places a plate with a steak on the ground just under my chin.

M takes the knife from my mouth and sticks it into the center of a steak. She places a teapot and cup and saucer on the ground of the hovel next to the plate holding the steak such that the steam from the cup wafts into my face. With her left hand balancing the plate and the right hand taking up the knife, she carves the steak into small pieces until half of the meat is cut up and half of it remains in a chunk.

This knife, she says, is the North Star. A thundering collapse sounds after she throws the knife behind her into the thicker darkness of the hovel. Later we find out it was a bookshelf breaking down under the weight of its objects but she acts as if nothing significant has occurred, feeding me the meat using the tips of the fingers of her right and left hands. As I am masticating, the director taps on the door. It falls off its hinges onto the dirt floor. Early morning light illuminates the domestic happiness we have realized for him.

"Forgive me for dropping by so early."

Of course we ask the director to have a seat then offer him a piece of steak, which he refuses politely. He removes a folded piece of paper from his breast coat pocket as he lowers himself to the floor almost as skillfully as Charlie Chaplin might have done in a similar scene.

What Flows? Who Needs?

And who knows now it is light now that the black marketers are out and about in the exploded shiphold off to the corner of one side of the drawing? These figures represent the *wrong side* before the time of plastic and rubber human and animal forms are blown up to mammoth proportions such that they obstruct our entry to the next world: a simulated game in a Manhattan funhouse. These mutineers or whoever they are have been written up several times in M's newspaper but not on the front page, which she reserves for her propaganda against crave-managed economic systems. Mavericks instead appear in the gossip columns under the sub-caption: Why Some Women Enjoy the Company of..., followed by a lengthy gesture toward leaving no one out.

Neither does she wish to mistake an attribute of another person for an attribute of herself—someone's frown for her own modified laugh for example. I get sick of myself, she confesses in a stage whisper.

"This could all be one fresco or a series of separate scenes rendered at disparate moments, duplicated in historical records, and lived by several people in disparate periods."

The director issues an order to a lackey to decode her mixed messages while he reads the letter he offers her with a little flourish. He crosses his legs in front of him, seated as he is now in front of the steak plate and my chipped and pallid form, which seems to have fallen into disuse.

M shrinks to eighteen inches and walks through me, haunting me while I continue to fade around her. The director is now on the other side of the mirror.

That's over and now we can go home, she says.

I almost like it here. I try to echo the cadence of her latest sentence so she doesn't flutter with wildness or contentiousness thereby disturbing the peacefulness in our present, poetic union. But for M, destination is akin to a fantasy lingering on the wings of death.

"Murder is a concept applied ubiquitously to all sorts of death; whereas, death is only death." When someone murders me, says M, it never lasts. I have been murdered several times and I always see that it is not me who is killed when this happens. Murders make egoists like me immortal. I am used to murder. Fantasy is the best site of murder. Though people die didactic, polemical deaths, deaths of rank and identity. Death by servitude is a preferred death: in it servants are reborn as vandals. The pickup bar I frequent is where some of the vandals hang out.

Before all of this incoherent death is more death: the mirror's prism guarantees this. Human forms collapse into iron and copper tailings, into skyless trees, and dips in the thermometer. Fish hide lower and lower in the lakes: they have appropriated human fear in order to alarm themselves further into surviving. M doesn't like these speculations of mine.

I exist as far as M is concerned only when she speaks or I ventriloquize her speech such that she finds her place in the sentence.

Will this be yet another death sentence? Her fearfulness in the face of my language is as open as a book. She is convinced that it is best to die in public. Alphabet letters crowd her cheeks in a bargain basement rush of emotion. "I will have my hut to go home to."

When they shiver, the birch trees are as beautiful as spiders. This image is a memory of her home. A hut with no lock is writing.

All ways are M's ways. That's how the letter starts.

The director copied that from me, she claims. It's all he knows to do when he writes. He will never find his own way to write. In the manuscript are several cryptic marks indicating shorthand attempts to sketch a set of designs below the statement and before the salutation. One of these cites Wittgenstein: *the whole form you could call a form of incompatibility.* "But he forgot to quote the words that go with the illustration." M, who has a fondness for Wittgenstein, groans in frustration over the director's copycat scribbles.

The Director Writes

Dear Reader, the book is written to give you the impression that anything is possible in respect to M and therefore M does not signify as human. It is also operating under several constraints, which, interestingly enough are what nourish the illusion that there is little constraint. First of all, the author has always wanted to focus her attention on the idea of the double for a duration. She is doing this in two books at once. In the other book M figures as the antagonist. In this book, however, she is purely agonistic, not to mention mournful. Within her agonistic position is a great deal of aggression and passivity combined. Nietzschean souls like her, decadent to the core, believe themselves to be outside the law. In this case, however, there really isn't any law. M is reticent to pass judgments and that's why I'm taking this charge upon myself.

Now on the one hand, one could view M truly as a decadent elitist and on the other hand one can see that in subscribing to that form of judgment on the romantic sensibility, one judges other kinds of criminals in the same way.

In fact, one creates an entire criminal class inside of one's own thoughts. The criminals themselves are both agents and products; they are not passive-aggressive but rather both aggressive and passive. They accept the world for what it is and they disregard its laws. M's proximity to them excites her. The synthesis is M's text: Portrait of M.

I see, says M, he wants to represent Minerva as a gangster. The gangster writes her own story and repels everyone: I am to be repellent. The director's letter is an effort at even-handedness, at neutral representation. He thinks he can fool me, and us! That odd creature.

M makes a show of dispensing with the letter: with the loose page between her teeth and her arms bent in front of her as if at half mast, she struts to the east corner of her hut then mechanically bends down at the waist without bending her legs, and, with the edge of the paper grazing the floor, surveys the ground seemingly for a protrusion she knows is there.

Upon her discovering the three-inch doorknob, the hut swirls with a galaxy of charismatic particles from M's dusting it off with the hem of my slip, the slip she had borrowed for the meeting with the director and never taken off since. Dust curls around her upturned ass as M lowers one hand to the doorknob, turning it with one short clockwise twist. The door, which is no wider than the knob, opens. M, now her normal acting self, rolls the letter up and inserts it into the hole then snaps the door closed.

"I didn't know about the hole."

My speaking seems to have startled M. She stands looking out past me with her arms judiciously folded on the slope of her belly and with her back to the little door on the floor so that it's hidden. Without speaking, she reminds me of the greedy regularity of my inner life ruled by a craving for subordination.

But M is incapable of fixing judgments on anything for very long.

The line between her and anything else, a pussycat or pussy willow or cattail for example, is fractured just enough for her to grow in the marshlands, between hillside and sea, as a native plant.

This has something to do with why one drawing is rendered in oil pastels and M's tears drop to the marsh pond as e's and a's. I can almost feel M co-inhabiting the plant. It is said that such an affinity with a drawing can renew a person's feeling of proximity to nature.

M likes to affirm those impressions that render her incapable of judgment because she is so wild about sex. "My room is clean because I am not clean." But like Raskolnikoff in *Crime and Punishment,* M can sense that upon occasion Razumikhin doubts her declarations.

Open your mouth, says M.

I try to say no but instead I say this is not the way it's supposed to go.

M touches the hinge between my upper and lower jaw. My mouth springs open. The three digits she inserts into my mouth taste like fruit that's just about to turn. As she rummages around further and further into my gullet, I begin to gag. The gagging is exceedingly pleasant. A warm, almost corrupt sensation of shadow swallows me. I close my eyes in the swollen shadow. When I open them again, she is holding a little scroll in her hand.

T A A Z R E F

She laughs with full force as she unrolls its message, then lets the sheet on which it is written float downward.

Her soldiers are climbing around on her. They appear to believe they have full reign of her body, but she hardly notices them at all. They are collapsing in happiness and rearranging their battle gear, but M is as sad as her laugh is strong.

In the swell of this activity, M agrees with me, she is to present herself as an enigma at all costs. "And this must be included in the drawing." The drawing must also mock something I love, she says. She turns the mirror on me for a minute so I can almost glimpse myself as her man.

Acknowledgements

Originally conceived as a diptych, the two parts of this work have taken a number of detours and gone through various permutations and radical rewritings over the past seventeen years. It is thus marked with many changes in circumstances: historical, artistic, and personal. The slippage between text-based writing and performance may also be evident to some readers of *W—/M—*. Several segments from "Look Again" were incorporated into *Performing Objects Stationed in the Sub World,* a play produced between 2001 and 2003 at Oxford Brookes University, England; The Lab and Small Press Traffic, San Francisco; and Zeitgeist Theater, Detroit. Segments of "Look Again" also have appeared in *The World.* A lengthy sequence of *Portrait of M* appeared in *Dispatch Detroit* and was likewise rendered as a solo performance for a conference held at the University of London in 1996.

The author wishes to thank the magazine editors who published samples from the two texts as well as those that have invited and encouraged the performances that influenced the realization of *W—/M—*. She also most gratefully acknowledges Adam Mitts for his help with proofs and the Provost's Office of Eastern Michigan University, which supported this book through the Faculty Research Fund in 2012.

Books by Carla Harryman

Poetry, Prose, Plays:

The Wide Road (written with Lyn Hejinian; Belladonna, 2011)
Adorno's Noise (Essay Press, 2008)
Open Box (Belladonna, 2007)
Tourjours l'épine es sous la rose, trans. Martin Richet (Ikko, 2006)
Baby (Adventures in Poetry, 2005)
Gardener of Stars (Atelos, 2001)
The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre (O Books, 1999)
There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn (City Lights, 1995)
Memory Play (O Books, 1994)
In the Mode Of (Zasterle Press, 1992)
Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays (This Press, 1989)
Vice (Potes and Poets Press, 1986)
Property (Tuumba Press, 1982)
Under the Bridge (This Press, 1980)
Percentage (Tuumba Press, 1979)

Critical Prose:

Non/Narrative, (special issue editor of *The Journal of Narrative Theory;* Eastern Michigan University, 2011)

The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography: San Francisco, 1975-1980 (with Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perleman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten; Mode D, 2006-2009)

Lust for Life: on the Writings of Kathy Acker (edited with Amy Scholder and Avital Ronell; Verso, 2006)

The Middle (Gaz Press, 1983)

Discography:

Open Box (with Jon Raskin and the Jon Raskin Quartet; Tzadik, Key Series, 2012)

SplitLevel Titles:

Alan Gilbert, *The Treatment of Monuments*
Carla Harryman, *W—/M—*
Catherine Meng, *The Longest Total Solar Eclipse of the Century*
Jerome Rothenberg, *A Cruel Nirvana*

CPSIA information can be obtained at www.ICGtesting.com
Printed in the USA
BVOW02s0300290813

329755BV00003B/16/P